PD09 - Condensed Pleasure

Post by “Elayne” of March 25, 2019 at 2:58 PM

Lacking further knowledge about additional words of Epicurus, I will now move on to my personal experience and medical research. DeWitt’s first conclusion, about intensity being related to timing, seems to hold up reasonably well on personal testing. If I do a number of pleasurable things in a short period, one after another, the sensation of pleasure I have is often more intense.

At first, however, I was not sure that simply more pleasures in a shorter time was the _only_ way to achieve intensity of pleasure. Examples of highly intense pleasure for me personally would include extremely palatable foods, orgasm, and thrilling physical sensations such as coasting down a steep hill on a bicycle. The speed, I supposed, could be considered a shortening of the pleasure duration of coasting down the hill, but I am not sure that is right, because just going very slowly down a hill does not provide me with any particular pleasure. DeWitt would have to say I am having pleasure but not noticing it, and then we are in the realm of fantasy. It’s also hard to see how to apply that to a bite of chocolate or orgasm—I don’t know how to make those less intense by slowing them down. On the contrary, both seem even more intense that way—eating slowly/ savoring, etc.

But... then I thought—what would be the underlying mechanism for condensing a pleasure into a shorter time period? Wouldn’t there have to be a brain activity going on? Pleasure isn’t a disembodied event—there is matter/energy and void only. Now I will need to look at neurotransmitter production, binding to receptors, and re-uptake to see if there is research on that related to qualitative intensity of pleasure. This is an area of neurology I have minimal knowledge about. I do know that it is possible to block the experience of pleasure with activities like sunbathing, by administering naloxone to block our opiate receptors. (If I recall correctly, the researchers used this to conclude that sunbathing was an addiction and therefore bad--omg, really, people? An example of our societal fear of pleasure!) I do not know what has been done to find out how our brain achieves intensity of feeling. I think this will be important to understand what is happening with condensation of pleasure. If we can correlate feelings of pleasure intensity with something like number of hits of endorphins on our endogenous receptors per time period, that would fit perfectly with the idea that intensity is related to timing—not of the bike ride but of the brain events. An extended pleasure might be the same number of endorphin- receptor contacts but over a longer period of time. But this is entirely conjecture on my part, so far.

I also know there are proposed to be a number of different pleasure neurotransmitters—dopamine, serotonin, endorphins (there are several), oxytocin and endocannabinoids (our own internal cannabis). To back up the idea that pleasure is one category of thing, there needs to be some commonality of event going on in the brain, despite

these different neurotransmitters, which is underlying pleasure. This could either be at the neurotransmitter level, such that one of the neurotransmitters is the “real” pleasure molecule, or something afterwards—some common effect of those neurotransmitters which is felt as pleasure. Otherwise I do not see how we can say that all pleasures are ultimately the same if equally intense (condensed)/ equally distributed in the body. Is there an alternative to thinking this way?

My guess is that endorphins are one key, because when these are blocked with naloxone, there is not pleasure, from what I’ve seen. I know that for me, when my daughter was an infant and I was on my newborn nursery rotation in medical school, hearing other babies cry would sometimes trigger an oxytocin mediated milk letdown—but this was not pleasurable, more so annoying, lol. So I don’t think oxytocin alone is sufficient for pleasure. I will see what I can find out in the neuropsych research. It’s quite possible we don’t know enough to say, yet. But if endorphins are what trigger the feeling of pleasure, it’s possible that actual biological event happening that corresponds with the feeling of pleasure is not the endorphins but the next step, when the endorphins bind the receptors and cause a cascade of events with ion channels. If there are convergent process of different neurotransmitters resulting in some common event, this would make sense—for such a critical process as pleasure, it seems unlikely that we would have no kind of backup systems.

I know there is a difference between the subjective feeling, the qualia, and the observable events of matter. However, in other cases, there is correlation—there are wavelengths of light perceived by us as red, subjectively. That is why I would expect a similar correlation in the brain when it comes to feelings of pleasure.

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